Conversion to Judaism

Finnish *gerim* on *giyur* and Jewishness

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

Pro graduni käsittelee suomalaisia, jotka ovat kääntyneet juutalaisiksi ilman aikaisempaa juutalaista taustaa ja perhettä. Data perustuu haastatteluihin, joita arvioin straussilaisella grounded theory-menetelmällä. Tutkimuskysymykseni ovat, kuinka nämä käännynnäiset näkevät mitä juutalaisuus on ja kuinka he arvioivat omaa kääntymistään. Tutkimuseni mukaan kääntyjän aikaisempi uskonnollinen tausta on varsin todennäköisesti epätavallinen, eikä hänellä ole merkittäviä aikaisempia juutalaisia sosiaalisia suhteita. Internetillä on kasvava rooli kääntyjän tiedonhaussa ja verkostoissa. Juutalaisuudessa kääntynyt näkee tärkeimpänä eettisyyden sekä juutalaisen lain, halakhan. Kääntymisen nähdään vahvistavan aikaisempi maailmankuva ja identiteetti ja kääntyjä hyväksyy rabbiinisen näkemyksen kääntymisprosessista. Lopuksi vertailen tämän tutkimuksen tuloksia muihin kääntymistutkimuksiin ja -teorioihin, joiden väitteet ja tulokset eivät aina vastaa oman tutkimukseni tuloksia.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords

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1 Introduction

Take a look at Amazon.com section on Judaism: *The Gerus Guide* by Aryeh Moshen; *Becoming a Jew* by Maurice Lamm; *Choosing a Jewish Life* by Anita Diamond; *Choosing to Be Jewish* by Marc D. Angel; *Conversion to Judaism: A Guidebook* by Lawrence Epstein. These are all guidebooks for converting into Judaism. It seems that there is a demand for these books; people are buying them. For this study I have interviewed those who have converted to Judaism without prior Jewish backgrounds.

Before modernity, the collective gave an identity for the individual. Nowadays a person can choose a religion, status and identity for herself. (Waxman, 2015, p. 152.) Yet, changing one's religion is an age old phenomenon. In the Bible, from Abraham and Ruth we find the first exemplary converts, converting from idolatry to monotheism. From the canon of Western literature we find converts from Augustine to Tolstoy to Greene. We see them in a Caravaggio painting. In music we hear tales of conversion from Amazing Grace to Bob Dylan. People have been converting, are converting, and more and more, they are converting to Judaism.

There is no global statistics for Jewish conversion. When it comes to the US context, more than 90% of those converting to Judaism are spouses of Jews (Forster & Tabachnik, 1991, p. xi). Andrew Buckser's study on converts in Denmark also notes that the vast majority of conversions are what he calls 'social conversions': conversions tied to the issue of mixed marriage, where either the convert has a Jewish spouse or a Jewish father (Buckser, 2003, pp. 70–77). Those converting to Judaism without a Jewish family are a clear minority. I have named these people, who are the subjects for this thesis, as *gentile converts*. Those with Jewish family background, either a Jewish spouse or Jewish family on their father's side, I have named as *peripheric Jews*.

The conversion to Judaism has been studied from many different angles, from textual study of rabbinic texts to quantitative questionnaires to qualitative research. Although gentile converts are present as a minority in some conversion studies (for example Buckser, 2003; Hadari, 2016; Lorenz, 2016a & 2016b; Mokoko Gampiot, 2013), this Master's thesis is, to my best knowledge, the first English language research concentrating only on gentile converts; to converts without prior Jewish backgrounds. Certainly the first one in Finland.

Judaism is not monolithic religion. It has various forms around the globe. It is notable that my research concentrates on Finnish *Orthodox* Judaism — very different from for example American *Reform*, British *Masorti* or Israeli *Dati Leumi* experience. Orthodoxy in itself is also fragmented. One of the most important aspects of this fragmentation for the Finnish convert is that Finnish Orthodox conversion is not accepted by the *Chief Rabbinate of Israel*, body of government controlling religious matters, also known by its Hebrew name *Rabbanut* ("Recognized Rabbinical Courts for Conversion", 2018). All but one of the converts – or *gerim* as is the Hebrew word for convert to Judaism – have converted in the framework of Helsinki congregation. This research is based on interviews of these converts.

My insider status has made this research possible: my background in the community has provided me the access to interview these converts. It has also developed an understanding of the conversions discourses which take place in the Finnish Jewish community.

1.1 Research Question

These research questions were formed according to my own interests in meaning-giving and to match and fill the gaps in previous conversion themed research. This research focuses on:
1.How do Finnish converts to Judaism without Jewish family members view Jewishness?
2. How do Finnish converts to Judaism without Jewish family members view their conversion?

1.2 Specifying Terms

The *halakhic* definition for a Jew, or in other words, the definition according to the Jewish law who is a Jew, is a person either born to a Jewish mother or a person who has converted to Judaism (see f. ex. Lorenz, 2016b, p. 69; Glenn & Sokoloff, 2011, p. 6; BT *Yevamot* 47ab). This is the orthodox viewpoint and it is also the definition of Jewishness of this paper. As mentioned above, those who have Jewish family or background, but have not converted to Judaism, I have name as *peripheric Jews.*

In this paper I often use the Jewish term *ger* for a convert to Judaism. For simplicity and to preserve anonymity, I do not use its female form *giyoret*, but sometimes I use its plural form *gerim*. Specifically those gerim who do not have Jewish family background I have

named *gentile converts.* The process of converting to Judaism is called *giyur*. *Giyur le<u>h</u>umra* is a giyur performed if the Jewish status of the person is not certain (Cohen-Weiss, 2016, p. 140). In the case of a convert, her conversion might not be accepted by all Jewish authorities, for example by the Israeli religious authority *Rabbanut* and she might need to redo her conversion with a *bet din* that might have different conversion standards. *Bet din* is the rabbinic court that among other things judges whether people are eligible or not for a conversion. One integral part of the conversion is a *mikve. Mikve* is a Jewish ritual bath that changes status of people and objects. (see f. ex. Samuels, 2015, pp. 357–358.)

In this thesis I am using Hebrew Academy's 2006 recommendations for romanisation of Hebrew words.

1.3 Research Framework

This research is difficult to locate into only one area of study. Different disciplines of social studies overlap and specific boundaries are often artificial (Eriksen, 2004, p. 8). This study could be classified belonging to Jewish studies or to religion studies, as its subjects are converts to Judaism.

This study has been influenced by anthropology: anthropology studies a group or a people that share their material, spiritual and social practices (Knuuttila, 1996, pp. 10–11). Anthropology is also interested in the context of the phenomenon and anthropological research is directed by data, not theory (Rambo, 2003, pp. 212–213). As Austin-Broos writes in her article *Anthropology of Conversion*, religions have their own ontology, cosmology, and dynamics. They are not just servants to market forces or social benefits. (Austin-Broos, 2003, p. 4.) I too do believe that religion should be studied from the viewpoint of the individual and that action is influenced by religious ideologies (see for example Furseth & Repstad, 2006, p. 35). Here I am interested in 'the Native's point of view' found in anthropology, how those who are studied see the world (Eriksen, 2004, p. 18).

However, unlike traditional anthropology, this study is not based on observation, (Eriksen, 2004, p. 45) but on semi-structured interviews that were influenced by previous observations. With artificial boundaries in social studies, perhaps it is then wise to locate this study under the broad umbrella of "cultural studies", which is interested in explaining a particular phenomenon and the meanings people give to things (Alasuutari, 1994, pp. 46–47).

1.4 Previous Research

Globally there is quite a bit of qualitative research on conversion to Judaism, but most of it either focuses on rabbinic texts on conversion or on the history of conversion. For example Shaye Cohen (1999), Gary Porton (1994) and Moshe Lavee (2018) are interested in rabbinic texts covering the topic of conversion. Segal (2014), Eilberg (2015) and Mariner (1999) gloss the history of giyur. Contemporary studies on giyur are often focused on peripheric Jewish groups, such as people from former Soviet Union countries (f. ex. Kravel-Tovi, 2012) or on Ethiopians (f. Ex. Seeman, 2003). The following recent case studies combine in their research peripheric Jews and gentile converts.

For his 2003 article *Social Conversion and Group Definition in Jewish Copenhagen,* Buckser interviewed the members of Jewish communities in Copenhagen and notes that most conversions are 'social conversions' that stem either from patrilineal Jewish heritage or for the sake of matrimony. Mokoko Gampiot finds hybrid Jewish convert identities and various motivations for conversion in her *Being a Black Convert to Judaism in France* from 2013. Steiner interviewed converts and rabbis during 2009–2012 and used archival material for her 2016 article *Conversion of Non-Jewish German to Judaism since 1945,* where she categorizes converts into three different groups: 1) wives and children of Jews 2) theologically motivated conversions and 3) existential seekers looking for new identity in Jewishness. In all of these categories conversion is at least partly motivated by the guilt of the Holocaust and the desire to make amends or to identify with the victim. Converts who had passed *London Beth Din* were interviewed in Nechama Harari's *'Don't be a stranger'. Giyur as a theologisation of the boundaries of (Jewish) identity* from 2016. Hadari is interested in the theology of conversion and contemplates the nature of Jews as a nation and Judaism as religion. This study returns to further analyze Mokoko Gampiot, Steiner and Hadari's case studies in the Discussion section of this research.

There is also some quantitative research on conversion to Judaism. In *Conversion to Judaism by Reform and Conservative Rabbis,* published in 1954, Eichhorn surveyed the amount of converts in American Reform and Conservative congregations and the nature of conversion study. In a more recent article *The Applicability of the Stages of Change Model to Jewish Conversion* (2005), Bockian et al. surveyed the changing commitments and

observances of Jewish customs of possible converts to Judaism and of those who already made the transition in the United States. The most recent quantitative research is Ben-Rafael's survey *New Jews of Europe* (2016). He found out that from EU-Jews from Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Sweden and the UK, only 11% of converts identified themselves as Orthodox (Ben-Rafael, 2016, p. 125).

Some studies on Jewish conversion are dedicated to Jewish conversion *from* Judaism to Christianity or to other religions (see for example Katznelson & Rubin, 2016). There are also numerous studies on *baal teshuva*-people, the 'new born Jews' (see for example Benor, 2012).

The identity of Finnish Jews has been a modestly popular subject for Master's theses for the past few years: Shaul has analysed the views of Finnish Jews on circumcision in his Master's thesis *Ympärileikkaus juutalaisuudessa* (Shaul, 2017), whereas Czimbalmos and Larsson discuss Jewish identities in their Master's theses *How Do They Jew? Identity and Religiosity in the Helsinki Jewish Community* (2016) and *Suomen juutalaisten nuorten aikuisten käsityksiä juutalaisuudestaan* (Finland's young Jewish adult's self perceptions of their Jewishness) (2014). There is also an ongoing academic project titled *Jewish Women in Finland* by Vuola and Pataricza, who by the time of writing of this thesis had published a blog text (Vuola, 2016).

1.4 Conversion

1.4.1 What Is Religious Conversion?

The *etic* point of view – or the view of the scientific community – has struggled to define what religious conversion is. The scientific discussion started with William James' 1902 lectures *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* where he chronicles various tales of sinners seeing the light (James, 1917, p. 103). Early American research was developed in Evangelical surroundings and was interested in the psychological state of the sudden religious conversion found in this milieu. This Evangelical *emic* notion of conversion – or the view of the religious group itself – defined early and subsequent scientific research on what conversion is. (Rambo & Farhadian, 2014, p. 5; Paloutzian, 2014, p. 215.) This cultural discourse can be seen even in more recent scholarship even beyond the boundaries of religion studies. The same

evangelical narrative of sudden change can be seen for example in Alcoholics Anonymous' narrative and in its psychological research where James is referred to (Forcehimes, 2014, pp. 505–507).

Thomas Thangaraj notes that the idea of changing from one religion to another is a Christian notion. He writes that Hindus would perhaps name their 'conversion' as a realisation, Buddhists as enlightenment and Jews as 'turning to God'. These traditions would not name their religious experiences as conversion. (Thangaraj, 2015, p. 26.) Thangaraj in his article *Defining Religious Conversion* divides religious conversion into different types that do not try to uncover the psyche of the convert, but typologise the conversions.

1. The first category, *religious conversion as rediscovery*, covers people who become religiously active in the tradition they were born into and were previously only nominal members. This category covers the New Born Christians and in Jewish tradition, the *ba'ale teshuva*. Thangaraj puts into this category also those who have no specific communal ties, but describe themselves as having become spiritual.
2. The second category, *religious conversion as preference* describes how one might change from one subgroup of a religion to another. If one converts to Catholicism from Lutheranism, this might be called a conversion.
3. The third category is *religious conversion as extension*, where a believer adds elements from other religious traditions to their own religious thinking and practice without seeing themselves belonging into two religions. Some religions allow this (for example, a Jew may add Buddhist meditation practice to her religious contemplation), some do not (for example Judaism and Christianity are mutually exclusive).
4. The fourth category is *religious conversion as replacement*. This is the most common way the word conversion is used and also the most dramatic one. Two changes take place: religious identity changes and religious membership or belonging changes too. (Thangaraj, 2015, pp. 27–31.)

In this paper as an etic definition of religious conversion I use Thangaraj's category of religious conversion as replacement (4).

1.4.2 Conversion to Judaism

The *emic* point of view – the view of the social group itself – is simple: "In Judaism, however, 'religious conversion' does not describe a change in attitude or life practice, but a specific ritual performed for the purpose of becoming a Jew" (Thangaraj, 2015, p. 30). Thus the conversion to Judaism does not depend only on the will of the individual to become and identify as a Jew, but she needs to be accepted as one (Sagi & Zohar, 2007, p. 8).

Judaism is an ethno-religion (Gross, 2015). Ethno-religion is a way of life and many aspects that universalising religions would see as secular, such as customs and diet and laws are part of the religion. Judaism does not encourage conversion and as Rita Gross writes: "The only way to 'convert' to an ethno-religion is to join the society and be adopted by its members" (Gross, 2015, pp. 34–36). Yet conversion to Judaism is possible.

The idea of conversion to Judaism derives already from the periods of Exile and the Second Temple. The change from the concept of ethnic nation to Greek *politea*, meant that ethnic outsiders could become part of the Judean nation. After the destruction of the Temple, rabbinic Judaism became hegemonic and the definition of Jewishness changed. Rabbis were able to develop a theology of conversion and first historic conversions date to first century CE. The standard conversion ritual was developed in the second century and can be found in *Babylonian Talmud*'s tractate *Yevamot* page 47ab. This ritual is comprised of four parts: 1) Introduction and examination 2) teaching 3) circumcision 4) ritual bath (*mikve*). *Yevamot* also gives some extra advice concerning women and slaves. Another conversion formula can be found in extra-Talmudic tractate *Gerim*, which mostly parallels *Yevamot*'s formula. (Cohen, 1999, pp. 122–131, 198–218.)

Modern conversion follows the standardised ritual described above. Conversion processes and requirements for the candidates and for the *bet din* vary under different auspices: In the guidelines of *The Rabbinical Council of America* the sponsoring rabbi of the convert cannot serve in the *bet din* (Blau, 2015, pp. 335–345); whereas *London Beth Din* requires the conversion candidate to live with a Jewish family for a minimum of six months ("Conversion", 2018).

Mariner (1999) describes the conversion process in non-Orthodox environment, but same description fits Helsinki congregation's conversion process: First the prospective convert contacts a rabbi and convinces him of her sincerity. Next she attends a special course

—a *giyur* course— where she studies some Jewish history, life cycle, the Jewish law —*halakha*— and liturgy. After the course they face a rabbinic board —*bet din*— who consider whether or not the individual may convert to Judaism. Those who pass will immerse in the *mikve*. Men have had their circumcisions beforehand. (Mariner, 1999, p. 100.) In the Finnish context the *giyur* course held in the premises of the Helsinki congregation does not automatically lead to *bet din*, summoned to Helsinki or held elsewhere, but some selection has already been made on who should face the *bet din* and immerse in the congregation's *mikve.*

2 Methodology

2.1 Grounded Theory

Theory —or methodology— is the overarching framework of the study. Or as Stiles puts it: "Theories are ideas about the world conveyed in words, numbers, diagrams or other signs" (Stiles, 2007, p. 122). Theory comprises the ontology and epistemology of the study and the network of concepts and terms, and how they are used in this particular theory (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2006, pp. 13, 18–19). A theory is the study's viewpoint to evaluate the clues and observations. Scientific research uses data to answer underlying questions of the research, but data in itself is not the ends of a research. (Alasuutari 1994, pp. 68–69.) A method is something to justify and validate the research's output. It can be a way of data gathering or analysing the data. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2006, p. 13.)

This study uses Straussian Grounded theory. Grounded theory is part of American qualitative research tradition, which has been influenced by empirism and pragmatism. Its fields of study have been ethnology, anthropology and sociology and its methods are tightly tied to the object of the study. In American qualitative research, methods of data gathering and analysis are more important than methodology and philosophical traditions. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2006, pp. 43–44.)

One of the reasons I chose grounded theory as my methodological framework was a mismatch with the general all-encompassing religious conversion theories and my interests. The extant research is focusing on the psychological state of the convert (f. Ex. Paloutzian,

2014) or in the language and narratives of conversion (f. Ex. Stromberg, 2014) or their theoretical backgrounds were in rational choice theory and 'religious market' theory (see f. Ex. Gooren, 2010). I did not find them fitting to the reality that I saw among the converts in Helsinki Jewish congregation. Grounded theory itself was born as a critique of deductive "grand theory" tradition. It is interested in explaining and theorizing cases or a particular phenomenon. (Luomanen, 2010, pp. 351–352.) I find grounded theory a good match for my research interests. This study generates new data and is inductively based on this new data. Grounded theory also fits the anthropological viewpoint of this study.

2.2 Reliability and Validity

Science needs to be impartial and critical. The knowledge it produces needs to be impersonal, universal and free for the scientific community to the use and critique. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2006, p. 126.) This is an inductive study and I am aware that theorising or generalising from individual data has its problems (Popper, 2002, p. 4).

Stiles (1993) defines what reliability and validity of qualitative research mean: "Reliability refers to the trustworthiness of observations or data; validity refers to the trustworthiness of interpretations or conclusions." (p. 601) This applies to this research; its analysis and conclusions are based on the data collected with interviews. I chose interviews as my sole data and did not use for example participatory observation as a source of data. With recorded and transcribed interviews other researchers can also have an access to unmediated data and either corroborate my inferences or falsify them. (See Popper, 2002, p. 18.) The measurement of validity, that similar conclusion are possible to infer from the same data by other researchers is called *replication* (Stiles, 1993, p. 612). With participatory observation, replication would not have been possible, as other researchers would have to rely on already mediated data, as for example recording during shabbat would not have been possible. Also, this research is interested in the informants' own experiences and meaning-giving, and participatory observation would not have been suitable method to gather this type of information.

For reliable research the researcher needs to follow scientific procedures rigorously, to take all the data into consideration and transcribe interviews correctly (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008, p. 188). Other important measurements for reliability are researcher reflexivity: how

did the data affect me and the research or was it used only to confirm my previous biases (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127; Stiles, 1993, p. 603)? Some of my reflections I have written down and can be seen throughout this thesis. For further positioning myself (Stiles, 1993, p. 603) I say that I believe that ideas and theologies can motivate people's behaviour.

According to Creswell and Miller, different types of research lenses and paradigm require different types of validity procedures. I position myself to constructivist tradition, which Creswell and Miller define as belief " in pluralistic, interpretive, open-ended, and contextualized (e.g., sensitive to place and situation) perspectives toward reality." (Creswell & Miller, 2000, pp. 204–205.) As I am most interested in the viewpoint of the researcher, Creswell and Miller write that following these prerequisites 'Disconfirming the evidence' is commonly used as validity procedure (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 125). Creswell and Miller describe this procedure as follows: "It is the process where investigators first establish the preliminary themes or categories in a study and then search through the data for evidence that is consistent with or disconfirms these themes" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). This procedure is inbuilt to the grounded theory method and I have followed it.

Hirsjärvi and Hurme adapt quantitative validity procedures for qualitative studies and it is worthwhile to take a look at them: Structure validity measures whether the research addresses the subject it claims to, and whether its concepts and categories are apt. Inner validity considers the causality of claims made in the research. Both of these measures of validity would belong to *coherence* in qualitative tradition, whereas outer validity evaluates whether the result of the research can be theorised and transferred to different situations. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008, p. 188; Stiles, 1993, p. 608.) While writing this thesis I have kept these measures of validity in mind, followed them, and return to them in the Conclusion section of this study.

2.3 Ethics

Good scientific research is internally cohesive and ethical. The choice of what to study and what research methods to use is an ethical choice. As my data gathering method I chose interviews. In interviews, the object of the research can either consent to the study or choose not to participate. In an observational study the consent is not as clearly definable, as in interviews. Also, I would not have been able to record all observational situations. Interviews

leave a trace and the same unmediated data can be used again by other researchers. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2006, pp. 127–135.)

Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK) advices in their 2009 guideline that in surveys, interviews and in observation based research, the researcher needs to give researcher's contact information, inform the subjects the topic of the research, purpose of data collection, the data gathering methods and time frame of the study. The subjects need to understand that they are participating a research and give their voluntary consent. Researcher should also be prepared to answer if the subjects have further questions on the scientific orientation of the study, the privacy of the data and the publication of the study. (TENK, 2009, pp. 5–7.)

My research follows the principle of informed consent. It does not cause physical, financial nor mental harm and features only adults. The Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity details the types of research that depart from the principle of informed consent and need to be reviewed by a separate ethical advisory board. My research does not fall into this category and does not need a separate ethical consideration. (TENK, 2009, pp. 2, 8.)

The most challenging part of the ethical principles is privacy. I have followed the 2018 privacy law Personal Data Act (*Henkilötietolaki*). In my research the collection of private information is necessary, but I have minimised the possible identification markers. I have numbered the participants; refer to all of them in gender neutral *she* or *ger;* and have two times modified quotations to protect privacy. The recorded and anonymised transliterated interviews exist currently in my possession for further scientific research. I did not hand over my data to private companies nor to public authorities. (TENK, 2009, pp. 11–12; "Hallituksen esitys eduskunnalle EU:n yleistä tietosuoja-asetusta täydentäväksi lainsäädännöksi", 2018.)

2.4 Progress of the Study

2.4.1 Choosing Subjects

The data was gathered in the Spring-Autumn of 2018 with individual semi-structured interviews in Finnish. The sample size was nine: six women and three men. Ages at the time

of the conversion ranged from 21 to 55. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The interviews were conducted either at my home, at the homes of the interviewees or at the university library.

The participants of this research were recruited via informal relations. I had previously met all my informants and knew some of them well. My sample does not comprise all Finnish converts to Judaism with no peripheric Jewish backgrounds. According to Stiles, unlike hypothesis testing studies, case studies such as this, do not need representative sampling to be relevant (Stiles 2007, p. 124). However, this study provides an extensive cross-section of the studied group.

All who participated in this study had some sort of connection to Jewish life at the time of the interview. It would have been interesting to be able to include those who had converted and subsequently entirely rejected Judaism and Jewishness, as this is not an uncommon phenomenon and has been reported in previous case studies (see f. ex. Hadari, 2016, p. 139). However, unfortunately the interview requests were declined. I sent an interview request also to other potential interviewees who fit the description of a *ger*, but either the request for the interview was declined or I did not get an answer. However, some of the informants of this study seem to have distanced themselves from communal practise and events after the interviews were conducted.

One of the subjects of this study identifies with *Sephardic Bnei Anusim* community, who trace their Jewish lineage back to the forced conversions of the Iberian peninsula in the 15th century (see f. ex. Baum, 2016, pp. 210–211). However, here I follow Israeli state's definition on who is a Jew or peripheric Jew according to the amended Law of Return ("The Law of Return", 1970). As *Bnei Anusim* do not count, I have included this person as a part of my study. One of my interviewees had converted in the *Rabbanut* framework and would present herself often as an outlier in the data.

2.4.2 Interviews

Interviewees give only the information they want to give. They evaluate if the interview situation is safe enough to tell their intimate stories. The information they give either consciously or non-consciously coincides with their own self image and with what they think the interviewer wants to hear. (Savio, 2017, p. 52.) My acquaintance with the informants affected the answers they gave. Some information might be given due to the familiarity of the

interviewer and some information withheld, that might be given to an outsider researcher might be withheld.

2.4.2.1 Interview Questions

I based some of the questions on the previous informal conversations that I had had with the informants. In these conversations certain themes came up from time to time, such as building Jewish networks, issues of Jewish observance and family relations. I wanted the informant to have the opportunity to express these thoughts that they had deemed important previously.

Strauss & Corbin acknowledge that previous research on similar phenomenon does and should influence the research questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 76). As I had read previous case studies on conversion to Judaism, I developed some of the questions with the findings of previous case studies in mind. These questions are still quite broad, they give room for the interviewee to answer in such a way that might either correlate or diverge from previous case studies. Some of the questions, like numbers 5.1 and 8, were vague on purpose to leave room for revealing interpretations.

The interview questions were:

1 When did you first become interested in Judaism?

1.a Did you know anyone Jewish before you became interested?

1.b Where did you find information on Judaism?

2 When did you decide to convert to Judaism?

3 How did the conversion process proceed?

3.a When did you contact the Jewish congregation?

4 What do you think is most important in Judaism/Jewishness?

5 When did you start to feel Jewish?

5.1 Do you dress Jewish or eat Jewish?

6 How often do you go to Jewish activities such as *shaḥarit shabbat* or *ḥagim*?

7 Do other people — Jews and non-Jews — see you as a Jew?

7.1 How did your family and friends react to your conversion?

7.2 Do you plan to do a *Rabbanut*-approved conversion?

8 What do you think about Israel?

Even if all the questions were not asked, all the topics were covered. Depending on the answer, clarifying questions and additional questions were also asked. From some I asked: "What has conversion meant for you?"

2.4.2.2 Transcription

My main interest for the data was what was said, not how it was said. I transcribed everything that was said on the recordings and the occasional laughter, but not for example the tone of voice or the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. It should be noted that transcribed text is an interpretation of the original interview (Ruusuvuori 2010, pp. 424, 427). The translated quotations add another level of interpretation (Nikander, 2010, p. 435).

2.4.3 Coding

Grounded theory is a data driven, inductive analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2006, p. 96). Strauss & Corbin write that as interpretation is a form of deduction, scientific discovery in grounded theory is always a mix of inductive and deductive processes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 136–137).

The objective of grounded theory is to build a theory. A theory is an explanation of a phenomenon. In grounded theory this is done by systematically gathering and analysing data. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 12–13, 22.) My data gathering was done with interviews.
In grounded theory data is analysed in various ways and levels. The first level is open coding. After microanalysis, which includes careful examination of the data, the researcher asks questions from the data and compares between pieces of information to find different dimensions and properties of the data and suggests how they are interrelated (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 58, 78–85; Luomanen, 2010, p. 352.) This leads to recognition of relevant phenomena in the data. Then she conceptualises phenomena i.e. labels or names them. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 101–103.) As concepts are formed the researcher also develops hypotheses. The next procedure is combining different concepts into relevant well defined categories. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 113–117.) These categories and hypotheses are tested by comparing them with previous categories and codings and either refining them or developing new ones (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008, pp. 164–167). For example one of the concepts that I found was "*mikve* as a transition point to Jewishness".

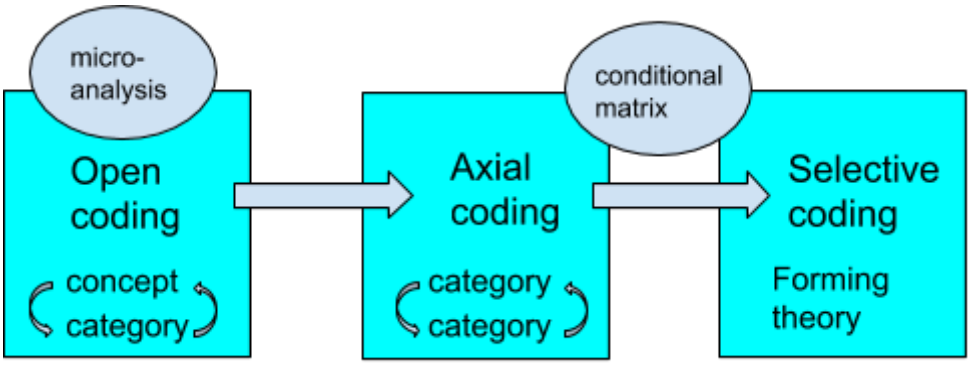
The next level of analysing aims to focus more deeply into the categories and determining their relationships and developing sub-categories. This is done with axial coding. During the axial coding phase, the '*mikve* as transition point to Jewishness' was posited as a sub-category of larger paradigm of 'accepting rabbinic and *halakhic* authority' and 'transition point to Jewishness'. In categorising one needs to determine the category: what its qualities are and how it differs from other categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 117, 124).

At this point of analysis the outlier data based on an interview that told of a different type of conversion experience (conversion done in Israel during the 1980s) was very useful, as it specified what was specific in conversion done in the Finnish context. In addition, my previous observations and some of the research literature proved themselves useful.

As I engaged with the data, it became necessary to explicate the context of Finnish gentile conversion to Judaism. Strauss & Corbin name this level of coding as "conditional/consequential matrix". There are different types of conditions on micro and macro level: causal, intervening or contextual. The researcher is interested in how these different conditions have affected the phenomenon. I mainly concentrated on relevant contextual macro conditions emerging from the data. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 130–132, 182–183.)

During the coding some self reflection is needed. In grounded theory this process is called theoretic comparison, which is intended to confront some of the biases and assumptions of the researcher (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 84). During the coding phase I found out that one of my interview questions (What do you think about Israel) did not significantly contribute to the research. The purposely vague question did not lead to ponderings about the nation of Israel or to significant musings about the state of Israel. This led to understanding that the role of Israel was my own bias and this question was left out from later interviews.

The process of axial-coding in itself was developing hypotheses. After the process of developing interlinked categories, it was time for the final stage of selective coding or choosing the main category and forming a theory. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 143.)
The main phenomenon or category that I was interested in was "the process of becoming a Jew". Strauss & Corbin define phenomenon as something which answers the question of "What is going on here" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 130)?



2.5 Conditional Matrix

Conversion to Judaism is not only a personal choice but happens in historical and global context. Following the grounded theory method, I will highlight some of the prevalent conditions affecting conversion to Judaism in Finland.

Societal conditions for conversion are quite good: Western legal framework makes conversion to Judaism in Finland possible, as the Finnish constitution guarantees religious freedom ("Suomen perustuslaki", 1999). This is not the case for example in countries such as Saudi Arabia, where there is no religious freedom ("International Religious Freedom Report for 2017", 2018).

Finland is not considered as an overtly antisemitic country, which might contribute to the viability of conversion to Judaism. According to Anti-Defamation League, in 2014 15% of Finns held antisemitic views. This is considerably less than the 69% of Greeks, but more than 4% of Swedes. ("ADL Global 100", 2014.) However, there are several Neo-nazi organisations operating in Finland, purporting antisemitism in various medium such as internet forums *Magneettimedia* and *Vastarinta.com* and the free newspaper *KauppaSuomi.* ("International Religious Freedom Report for 2017", 2018). In 2014 there were 7 antisemitic hate crimes reported to the police, compared to 11 in 2013 and 8 in 2015. Although much less compared to France's 851 reported crimes in 2014 ("Antisemitism - Overview of data available in the European Union 2006–2016", 2017), adjusted to the Jewish and gentile populations in Finland, the amount is not small and not all incidents are reported. The societal conditions in Finland allow conversion to Judaism.

Finland is traditionally Lutheran country and in the year 1990, when all but the youngest interviewee had been born, 87,8 % of the population belonged to the Finnish

Evangelical Lutheran Church. In 2017 this number had dropped to 70,9 %. (“Väestö”, 2018.) Although the power of institutional religion has waned, Finns still hold Lutheran Church in high regard. Also, private religiosity has not disappeared. For example 45 % of Finns believe in God and 39 % describe themselves as religious. (Ketola & Niemelä & Palmu & Salomäki, 2011, pp. 11–12, 23.) The individualisation of religious belonging and expression may have an impact on conversions. However, in my sample of informants many already came outside the normative Finnish religious framework: Almost half of the subjects had not been baptised into the mainstream Lutheran Church, although one decided to join as a teenager. Also, two had backgrounds in the same non-mainstream revival movement within the Lutheran Church.

Conversion process is also governed by the Jewish tradition and procedure of conversion. The possibility for Orthodox conversion in places where there are Jewish communities should not be taken for granted. For example (Orthodox) conversion in the countries of Latin America is not possible (“Recognized Rabbinical Courts for Conversion.”, 2018). In Finland there are only two Jewish congregations and only in Helsinki Jewish congregation conversion is possible (“Juutalaiset Suomessa”, 2018). In 2008 one of the requirements for the conversion was to live within a walking distance from the synagogue. This requirement laxed and in 2018 those living outside this perimeter and even outside Helsinki were accepted. The conversion procedure itself presents another macro condition: The *giyur* course often takes years and not everyone is accepted to convert.

3 Analysis

The question for this study was, how Finnish gerim without Jewish family members view their conversion and Jewishness. Following the grounded Theory coding and categorization described above, I have gathered the most important codes into the table below. I have gathered them into 2 + 3 categories. The first two categories, *Who* and *Judaism* describe the people who decide to convert and what they see they are converting into. The next three categories *Networks, Transition Point* and *Acceptance* describe the process of converting and becoming a Jew. In this chapter I will explicate these categories, take a look at outliers and in the end present my own grounded theory.

Who	Judaism	Networks	Transition point	Acceptance
seekership	*halakha* is important	internet & social media	*mikve* as transition point	total acceptance by all impossible
non-Lutheran backgrounds	most important is to be ethical	no prior Jewish networks	"homecoming" experience	Jew or *ger*?
individualism	Judaism is logical	congregation & other gerim form networks	conversion as process	Helsinki framework
	information from internet			positive & pragmatic outlook on *giyur le<u>h</u>umra*

3.1 Who and What Kind of Judaism/Jewishness?

A Finnish ger has most often a tertiary level education. She is youngish or middle-aged. She is quite likely to come from unhegemonic religious background. Majority of informants who came from religious backgrounds had been raised in the environment of Judaising family traditions and/or Christian Zionism. She is an individual seeker.

> "Kun muutenkin oli kiinnostunut kaikennäköisistä uskonnoista ja filosofioista ja ideologioista ja mistä lie. Mä tavallaan etin itteeni - - En tiedä missä vaiheessa se juutalaisuus niinku erityisesti nousi siinä esiin." (8)

> "Anyhow I was already interested in all kinds of religions and philosophies and ideologies and some such. I was kinda looking for myself. - - I don't know at what point especially Judaism stood out." (8)

> "[Aloin] niinku kyseenalaistaa näitä ristiriitasuuksia. Minkä takia kokonaan ohitetaan Vanha testamentti ja mikä siinä on? Pitäis olla se koko kirja niinku pitää, se on tavallaan pyhää tavaraa ja pitäis kuulua tähän. Sit siihen tuli myöhemmin tämmösiä, mitä enemmän tutki ja tuli enemmän kysymyksiä ja sit alko huomaa enemmän ristiriitaisuuksia. Ehkä se syy miks sitten hakeutu siihen, oli sitten oli se juutalaisuuden looginen puoli." (2)

> "[I started to] like question all these contradictions. Why do you disregard the Old Testament and what's in it completely? It's the whole book, you should keep it, it's kinda holy stuff and should belong here. Then later it was the more you studied the more questions you had and you started to notice more contradictions. Maybe that was the reason why I gravitated towards it was the logical side of Judaism." (2)

She sees Judaism as the right religion for her and acknowledges that Judaism might not be the right religion for all. This line of though is not only in concurrence with individualism, but also with the tenets of Judaism (see f. ex. Schoon, 2006). For the Finnish *ger* Judaism is a logical and ethical religion that comprises all aspects of life.

> “Tää on elämätapa. Ja se miten mä näen tän maailman, niin kyllähän juutalaisuus on täysin muokannut sitä. En mä tietäis mitä mä olisin ilman tätä mun juutalaisuutta. Mä elän juutalaista elämää, niin en mä osaa sanoa merkityksestä. Sehän on ihan kaikkialla. - - Se juutalaisuus täyttää ihan koko päivän. Ja se tulee vastaan vaikka töissä tai muuallakin mua ihan koko ajan. - - Mähän niinku hengitän juutalaisuutta. Onhan se mulle ihan koko elämä.” (6)

> “It’s a way of life. And how I see this world, Judaism/Jewishness ha completely shaped it. I don’t know what I would be without my Jewishness. I live Jewish life, so I can’t say about its meaning. It’s everywhere. - - Jewishness fills the whole day. And I come across it for example at work or elsewhere all the time. - - I like breathe Jewishness. For me it’s whole life.” (6)

When I asked what is the most important thing in Judaism/Jewishness (Finnish language has only one word for both Jewishness and Judaism), a common answer was “to be ethical” or “love another like you love yourself”. Many see that Jewishness makes them strive to become a better person.

> “Mä kuitenkin näen tärkeenpänä sellaiset sydämen mitsvat ja sellaset, että yrittää tavallaan toteuttaa sellaisia perusperiaatteita, niinku kohtele muita ku tahtoisit itteäs kohdeltavan ja silleen. Että ehkä tulee enemmän mietittyä näitä kun aikasemmin. Millaista on olla hyvä ihminen ja tulee ehkä enemmän mietittyä niinku omia käyttäytymistapoja ja kaikkea asenteitaan ja silleen kriittisemmin.” (1)

> “I think the more important things, the heart’s mitsvas and such things, they are the more important. That you try to realise the basic principles like treat others as you would like to be treated and so on. Maybe I think more about these things now than before. What is to be a good person and maybe I think more about my own behaviour and my attitudes more critically.” (1)

> “Mun mielestä tärkeintä juutalaisuudessa on olla hyvä ihminen. Siis se on se ison mitsva.” (5)

> “I think the most important thing in Judaism/Jewishness is to be a good person. That’s the biggest mitsva.” (5)

> “Juutalaisuus lähtee siitä että on yks Jumala, eli todellisuus on niinku pohjimmiltaan yks ja ihmisellä ei oo mitään erillistä, sellasta, tai siis niinku kaikki mikä ihmisellä on se pitäis kohdistaa tän yhden perustotuuden ja Jumalan palvelukseen. Eli tällanen ajatus. Ja sit toinen on se, millä tavalla se ilmenee on korkeella eettisellä elämäntavalla, missä otetaan toinen ihminen huomioon itseään enemmän ja ei tehdä toiselle sitä mitä et haluaisi että sinulle tehdään.” (4)

> “Judaism is about that there is one God. That means that reality is basically one and a person doesn’t have anything separate, like everything that a person has should be directed towards this one basic truth and to serving God. So that is the idea. And the second thing is that how this is realised is with highly ethical way of living, where you consider others more than yourself and you don’t do to the other what you would not want to be done to you.” (4)

> “Mä törmäsin sellaseen yhteen videoon, jossa tavallaan selitettiin juutalaisuuden pääprinsiipit. Et niinku ne ohjenuorat, et mihin juutalaisuus perustuu. Ja mä ihastuin tavallaan siihen eettisyyteen.” (2)

> “I bumped into a video where the main principles of Judaism were explained. Like the guidelines that Judaism is based on. And I kinda infatuated with the ethicalness of it.” (2)

3.2. Networks and Information

As the subjects of this study are those converting to Judaism without Jewish family members, their networks are very different to those who have Jewish families. Only about half of the

converts in the Finnish context had some Jewish network prior to the decision of converting. These prior networkd included some significant relationships and some acquaintances with Jews prior to the decision to convert.

> "Tunsin, mut en tuntenut ihmisiä joilla olisi ollut mitään tekemistä seurakunnan kanssa. Meillä on perhetuttuja." (4)
>
> "I knew [Jews], but none who would have had anything to do with the congregation. We have family friends." (4)
>
> "En tuntenut ketään. Enkä ollut kauheen tietonen juutalaisesta kulttuurista sillä tavalla että, joo en." (5)
>
> "I didn't know anyone. Neither was I all that aware of Jewish culture in that way. Yeah, no." (5)

Two of my informants had different conversion careers than my other informants. They had lived extensively in Israel. In Israel these *gerim* followed local customs and mingled with local people and developed interest to Judaism. Thus unlike most other gentile converts, they had substantial Jewish networks. Their Jewish education also came partly through these networks.

> "[Kiinnostus]kehitty mitä enemmän siellä Israelissa oli ja kun asuttiin tuli vietettyä niitä juhlia ja sit jotenkin vaan, 2008 alettiin viettää sapattia." (9)
>
> "I became more interested the more I was in Israel, and when we lived there we celebrated the festivals and then somehow in 2008, we started to keep the Sabbath." (9)
>
> "Tää mun poikaystävän tausta oli mielettömän uskonnollinen. - - Ja mähän olin tietysti yliopistossa tehnyt vaikka kuinka paljon kavereita ja nehän aina konsultoi mua, aina kun oli jokin juutalaiskysymys, että mitens tää nyt menee." (6)
>
> "My boyfriend's background was incredibly religious. - - And I had made a lot of friends at the university and they always consulted me with some Jewish questions, like how does this now go." (6)

Studying Judaism is mostly intellectually and *halakhically* oriented solitary and bookish business. Internet was one of the main sources of information on Judaism, especially for those who had converted in recent years. They had established Jewish-themed networks on social media and internet forums.

> "Me ruvettiin siinä kirjoittelee siinä mun giyurin ihan - itseasiassa jo ennen kun mä otin rabbi Simoniin yhteyttä, niin mä olin tähän hasidiin yhteydessä sen nettiryhmän kautta. Se ehdotti tota Shabat.comia. Se itseasiassa melkein mut ilmoitti sinne sisään tai lähetti linkin tai muuta. Jonkun verran mä olin häneen yhteydessä ennen kun mä menin giyur-kurssille. Hän neuvo vähän mitä kannattaa tehdä." (7)
>
> "We started corresponding at [the beginning] of my giyur – actually even before I contacted rabbi Simon I was in contact with this hasid via that net group. He suggested Shabat.com and actually almost joined me in or sent a link or something. I was to some extent in contact with him before I went to the giyur course. He gave some advice on what to do." (7)
>
> "He kutsu mut osaks sellasta nettiyhteisöö ja sitä kautta mä tutustuin ja sain vastauksia uskoon liittyviin kysymyksiin." (3)

> "They invited me to an online community and there I got acquainted with and got answers to spiritual questions." (3)

Although previous converts who had begun on their conversion path more than ten years earlier had also utilised internet, they relied more on books and personal contacts. If they had had long distance learning and/or discussions via internet, this was only after initial contact was made offline.

> "[Löysin tietoa] netistä varmaa aluks. Me ruvettiin kerää, ostaa kirjoja kauheesti, niinku Artscrollin kirjoja ja erilaisen kirjallisuuden kautta se lähti varmaan ihan aluks." (5)

> "[I found information] from the net in the beginning. We started to collect, to buy a lot of books, like Artscroll books and it started through different literature in the beginning." (5)

> "Et jos ei olis ollut internettiä, mä en olis ikinä kiinnostunut enkä kääntynyt." (8)

> "If there was no internet, I would never have become interested [in Judaism], and never would have converted." (8)

> "Sillä oli erilaisia kursseja mitä se piti nuorille aikuisille. Siellä oli kabbalasta ja erilaisista aiheista kursseja. Ja se sit mut kutsu, tuu ihmeessä niille kursseille mukaan." (4)

> "They had various courses for young adults. The courses were about kabbalah and other subjects. And then I was invited to participate these courses." (4)

The first contact with the congregation is a difficult hurdle to pass, and it takes from months to years to muster courage to do so. (Most participants reported this experience.)

> "Mä ajattelin että nyt mun täytyy. Tavallaan niinku, nyt tai ei koskaan. Niin sit se eteni silleen, että mä pistin vaan sähköpostia yks ilta pitkän harkinnan jälkeen. Tai siis kun mä olin pitkään sitä odottanut ja lopulta sitten uskaltauduin." (1)

> "I thought, now's the time. Now or never. Then it happened that one evening after long consideration I just emailed them. I had waited for this a long time and in the end I had finally mustered up the courage." (1)

For the lone *ger*, the congregation becomes important. *Gerim* find peer support from the *giyur*-group and socialize with other active congregants, many who are *gerim* themselves. Some find networks from congregation's various cultural clubs. But most *gerim* seem not build wide networks to the unobservant non-active majority of Jewish congregants, perhaps due to the lack of prior immersive experiences of Jewish schooling. However not all aspects of the congregation were positive:

> "Semmonen niinku politiikan tekeminen ja semmonen sisäpiirien, kuppikuntien välinen kiistely niin se.. se tuntuu tosi pahalta tälleen kun käy niin, sitten se välillä iskee ku märkä rätti." (3)

> "Like that making of politics and the insiders', cliques' bickering. That feels really bad when it happens, it's like a wet blanket thrown on you." (3)

3.3 Becoming Jewish

Those with Jewish family members either do not see the need to convert to feel Jewish or if they do convert, they do so to validate what they already feel and often grudgingly (see Buckser, 2003, p. 77). Also for gentile converts the conversion to Judaism was often viewed as a confirmation of what the converts already had felt for a long time. When asked about the decision to convert one *ger* answered:

> “Varmaan mä jollain lailla päätin sen jo ihan silloin jo niinku lapsuudessa. - - Ja sitten joskus täysi-ikäsenä, reilu kakskymppisenä kun oli asunut omillaan ja kaikkee, niin silloin oli jo ajatellut että jossain vaiheessa se on pakko sitten tehdä silleen virallisestikin - -Ennen kun mä otin yhteyttä tohon seurakuntaan niin mä ajattelin että nyt mun täytyy se niinku tehdä. Jossain vaiheessa, ettei voi vaan niinku olla tälleen niinku.” (1)

> "I guess I somehow decided it already in childhood. - - And then as an adult, twenty plus when I was already living on my own and everything, then I thought that I need to do it officially, to take the first step like really. - - Before I contacted the congregation I thought: now I need to do it at some point. That you can't be just like this." (1)

Another reflected on the when they felt Jewish and the point of conversion:

> “Mä oli varmaan tuntenut itteni juutalaiseks jo kauemmin, mutta sillon tuntu että tää nyt vaan sinetöi sen mitä mä oon aina kokenut. Tavallaan se oli hyvin vahva se kotiintulemisen tunne.” (5)

> "I guess I had felt Jewish already longer, but then I felt that this [conversion] just seals what I have always felt. In a way there was a very strong feeling of home coming." (5)

Almost all expressed that they felt somehow Jewish already before the conversion, some even before the *giyur*-process began.

> “[Tunsin itseni juutalaiseksi] giyur-kurssin aikana viimeistään, kun oli joku sidos tullut siihen seurakuntaan ja ku oli jo lopullisesti päättänyt että tekee sen ja ties että se tulee nyt lähitulevaisuudessa tapahtumaan. Ja niiku noudatti asioita jo ja rukoili ja tiesi paljon ja oli niinku sisällä, niin ehkä se jossain vaiheessa siinä tuli niinku viimeistään. Ja sitten no tietysti lopullisesti sitten sen bet dinin ja mikven jälkeen.” (1)

> “[I felt Jewish] at latest during the giyur course, when I had some connection to the congregation and when I had already finally decided that I would do it and I knew it would happen in the near future. And I practised the things and I prayed and I knew a lot of things and was like in, so maybe at some point there it came at latest. And then of course finally then after the bet din and mikve.” (1)

> “Mä oon tuntenut [itseni juutalaiseksi] ihan sieltä pikkutytöstä asti. Muut sai rippiristit, mun vanhemmat osti mulle daavidintähden.” (9)

> “I’ve felt [Jewish] from little girl. Other got crosses for their confirmation, my parents bought me a Star of David.” (9)

Although all *gerim* who had converted in the Finnish context cited religious aspects in their conversion narratives, some presented identification with the Jewish peoplehood and saw conversion as the necessary step that needed to be taken to join the Jewish nation. For

example one informant told about the initial identification with the victims of the Holocaust as the starting point for the *giyur*-process:

> “jotenkin mulla oli semmonen fiilis tuli että tässä on ikäänkuin minun ihmiset olisivat olleet tätä porukkaa joka sitten hävitettiin siellä keskitysleireissä.” (4)
>
> "somehow I had the feeling that these people were somehow my people who were then killed in the concentration camps." (4)

Another one felt the need to formalise an already lived identity:

> “Mut ohjattiin että mun pitäis kääntyä jos mä haluan olla juutalainen, että se ei riitä että mä julistan tän vaan.” (3)
>
> "I was told that I need to convert if I want to be a Jew. It's not enough that I declare it by myself." (3)

Many reported a “homecoming experience” either before or after the conversion:

> “Jotenkin se jumalanpalvelus oli tosi voimallinen kokemus. Mulla oli semmonen fiilis että mä kuulun joukkoon, että mä oon tullu himaan.” (4)
>
> “Somehow that [Rosh Hashana] service was really powerful experience. I had the feeling that I belong, that I’ve come home.” (4)
>
> “Mut kutsuttiin bar mitsvaan,- - niin se oli ensimmäinen kerta kun menin synagogaan. Sillon kun mä menin sinne, mulla oli sellainen tunne että mä oon tullut kotiin.” (7)
>
> “I was invited to a bar mitsva - - and that was the first time that I went to a synagogue. When I went there, I had a feeling that I’ve come home.” (7)
>
> “Musta niinku tuntuu että nyt mä olen palannut juurilleni.” (9)
>
> “I feel that now I have returned to my roots”. (9)

Although *gerim* mention feeling Jewish at various points in their life and that becoming a Jew is a process, almost all who converted in the Finnish context view the *bet din* and *mikve* as a transition point to becoming a Jew. This means that they accept the rabbinic power to determine who is a Jew.

> "Mun mielestä se on niinku prosessi. Mä en nää sitä mustavalkoisena. Tietysti ennen mikvee mä olin kääntymisprosessissa ja sen jälkeen mä olin juutalainen, et siinä mielessä niinku halakhisesti.” (7)
>
> “I think it’s a process. I don’t see it as black and white. Of course before mikve I was in conversion process and after it I was a Jew, halakhically speaking." (7)
>
> “Voit pitkänki aikaa, sä oot vähän niinku siinä välimailla. - - Sä tuut mikvestä ja se arki alkaa nyt, niin sä tajuut, niin eihän asiat millään tavalla muutu. - - Ihmiset ne niinku monta kertaa ne odottaa jotain ihmettä taivaalta, että tadaa! Mä oon nyt juutalainen ja nyt kun mä kävelen tuolla niin kaikki osottaa että tuo on juutalainen. Hahhah! - - Sä kasvat tavallaan siihen identiteettiin. - - mutku eihän se [prosessi] oo niinku koskaan valmis. - - Mut kyl se niinku se mikvestä tuleminen ja nää niin ne oli semmosia aika konkreettisia. - - Et oli berit mila [circumcision] niinku ensimmäinen semmonen konkreettinen. Et se oli siinä tavallaan, et se oli selvästi niinku selkee. - - Se mikvestä tuleminen, niin se oli se lopullinen. Että nyt on kaikki niinku loksahtunut paikoilleen. (2)
>
> “For a long time you’re between Jewishness and non-Jewishness. - - When you come from mikve and the mundane starts, then you realize that things haven't changed. Sometimes - - people expect some miracle from the sky, tad-aah! I'm now Jewish and when I walk on the streets people point at me saying there goes the Jew. Hahahah. - - But you kinda grow into the identity. - - The process is never finished.

> - - But coming from mikve was something concrete. - - I guess berit mila [circumcision] was the first concrete sign of Jewishness, it was so obvious. But coming from mikve - - was the final one. That now everything has fallen into place." (2)

As can be seen from the quotes in this chapter and below, the *gerim* are very aware of the *halakhic* procedure of conversion:

> "Kun mä tajusin että kaikki kyseenalaistaa mun giyurin, niin sitten mä rupesin ittekin kyseenalaistamaan sitä. Mä otin sitten selvää, mä opiskelin sitten oikein perusteellisesti nää halakhat jotka liittyy giyuriin. Ja mitä mä sieltä löysin, en mä löytänyt mitään mikä olis ollut ristiriidassa sen mun giyurin kanssa. Et päinvastoin. Pikemminkin näiden tiukkojen bet dinien giyurit tuntu olevan ristiriidassa sen halakhan kanssa. Et ne ei millään tavalla noudata sitä systeemiä siellä tai vaatimuksia tai näin. Ja ylipäätänsä miten ihmiset ymmärtää giyurin niin se ei vastaa sitä, mitä jossain halakhan kirjoissa lukee. Et kyllä mä sen perusteella päädyin siihen, että se mun giyur, jos mä en nää siinä mitään vikaa, niin tuskin Jumalakaan näkee siinä mitään vikaa." (8)

> "When I realised that everyone's questioning my giyur, I myself started to question it. I got to the bottom of it, I studied the halakhas related to giyur in detail. And what I found, I didn't find anything that would conflict with my giyur. On the contrary. Rather these strict bet dins and their giyurs seem to contradict the halakha. They don't follow in any way that system or requirements. And anyhow how people understand giyur doesn't correspond to what some halakha books say. So based on that, I concluded that my giyur, if I don't see anything wrong with it, then I guess God won't see anything wrong with it." (8)

Although they accept that *bet din* can judge who is a Jew and who isn't, it is not up to *bet din* to make someone a Jew. The transition point is individual acceptance of mitsvot, which makes a person Jewish. Question on *giyur le<u>h</u>umra* pointed out the voluntary active decision of becoming a Jew by the *ger* herself:

> "Mulla ei oo mitään sitä vastaan että voisin mennä uudestaan bet diniin ja mikveen. Mutta sit taas toisaltaa se sotii vastoin sitä mitä mä ajattelen tästä. Koska mä oon jo tehnyt sen päätöksen. Miten he vois kumota sen liiton minkä mä oon tehnyt Jumalan kanssa?" (3)

> "I have nothing against it. I could go again to bet din and to mikve. But then again it's against what I think about this. Because I've already made the decision, how could they overturn it? How could they overturn the covenant that I've made with God?" (3)

The converts who had done a *giyur le<u>h</u>umra*, a second conversion after the first one, saw the first conversion as a valid transition point to Jewishness:

> "Se oli mulle semmonen rajapyykki tavallaan, että kyllä mä koen että musta tuli juutalainen siinä kohtaa. Ja sehän oli halakhinen kääntyminen sinänsä, että ei siinä mitään. Siinä oli kolme rabbia ja käytiin ortodoksimikvessä ja otettiin vastaan mitsvat. Ja se oli mun mielestä näistä bet dineistä vielä kaikkein vaativimpikin. - - Varmaan siitä, siellä mä on ainakin ekan kerran saanut äänen, et hei nyt on niinku juutalainen olo." (5)

> "It was a transition point for me. I feel that I became a Jew then. And it was a halakhic conversion anyhow. There were three rabbis and we went to Orthodox mikve and received the mitsvot and I think it was the most challenging of these bet dins. - - I guess from there, there I at least got a voice that hey, now I feel Jewish." (5)

Seeing Jewishness as a process has another aspect to it: some expressed some ambivalence over their own Jewishness. Can a convert ever become truly a Jew, or are they *gerim*, somewhere in between?

> "Kyl mä niinku halakhisesti oon juutalainen, mutta en mä tiedä. - - Musta tuntuu että mä oon puoliks juutalainen. Mä oon tavallaan osittain juutalainen ja sit osittain en." (8)

> "Yeah, halakhically I'm Jewish, but I don't know. - - I feel like I'm half Jewish. Kinda Jewish, kinda not." (8)

> "Kun ihminen kääntyy juutalaiseks ja hän saa heprealaisen nimen, se ei oo ben Yehuda, eikä se oo ben Yisrael, tai Yitsak tai Ya'akov tai mikään tämmönen, vaan se on ben Avraham. Eli kääntyessä musta on tullut Aabrahamin, ei Juudan lapsi. Musta ei oo tullut juutalaista, musta on tullut aabrahamilainen." (4)

> "When a person converts to Judaism and he gets a Hebrew name, it's not ben Yehuda, it's not ben Israel, or Yitshak or Ya'akov or anything like this, but it's ben Avraham. So when I converted I became child of Abraham, not Judah. I didn't become a Jew but an Abrahamian." (4)

3.4 Acceptance

The *gerim* are aware that not all see and accept them as Jews, not born Jews themselves nor gentiles. However, they see that the majority in Helsinki context accept them as Jews.

> "Kukaan ei ole millään lailla osoittanut, että et kuulu joukkoon. Mä en tunne yhtään sitä mitä puhutaan, että Helsingissä ei hyväksytä uusia jäseniä. - - [kerhotapahtumassa] oli sellainen olo, että meidät on otettu mukaan" (9)

> "No one has indicated in any way that you're not one of us. I don't feel it at all what they say that in Helsinki they don't welcome new members. - - [In club event] I really felt that we were really accepted." (9)

Helsinki context, the composition of the congregants has also changed throughout the years and according to one informant this has affected how converts are accepted to more welcoming in recent times. For some, Helsinki context also dictates in some degree what kind of Jews they are. For example with the question if the ger dresses 'Jewishly':

> "En mä nyt ehkä. Ja tietysti ehkä nyt naimattomalla naisella ei tällasessa moderni ortodoksi tai open orthodoxy seurakunnassa oo mitään sellasta hirveen juutalaista pukeutumistapaa." (1)

> "Not really, and maybe for an unmarried woman in this kind of Modern Orthodox or Open Orthodox congregation there isn't really any terribly Jewish way to dress." (1)

> "Kyl mä pukeudun juutalaisittain. - yritän peittää solisluun ja kyynerpään ja polvet. Pukeutumisena on useimmiten pitkä hame. Ja sen myötä nilkatkin peitetty. Ei tarvi olla. Tässä seurakunnassa ei ehkä tarvi olla ihan niin tiukka. Se on vaan osa myös sitä omaa pukeutumista ehkä enemmän kuin sit sitä että yritän olla kauheen tseniut. Tulee vaan luontaisesti." (3)

> "Yeah I dress Jewishly. - - I try to cover the collar bone and elbows and knees. Mostly I dress in long skirt and with that I cover my ankles. You don't need to be. In this congregation I guess you don't need to be that strict. It's just more part of my own style than that I tried to be somehow terribly tseniut (modest). It just comes naturally." (3)

> "Joo. Käytän aina hameita ja käytän aina paitoja joissa on pitkät hihat ja tällaistä. - - Ortodoksijuutalaisuuden sisällä se pukeutuminen auttaa sua hirveesti. Jos sä pukeudut tietyllä tavalla se tekee aivan hirveen ison eron siinä miten sä tavallaan oot siinä, miten sut nähdään ja miten sua kohdellaan siinä yhteisössä. (8)
>
> "Yeah I always use skirts and I always use long sleeved shirts. - - Within Orthodox Judaism the way you dress helps immensely. If you dress in a certain way it makes really big difference how you're kinda there, how you're perceived and how you're treated in that community." (8)

Some view that everyone knows in the Helsinki congregation who is a convert and who is not, and this is the reason that they will not be viewed as 'real' Jews and appreciate the anonymity of Israel or other Jewish communities.

> "Ehkä vielä vähemmän täällä [nähdään juutalaisena], koska täällä tiedetään ketkä kääntyy ja täällä se on julkista tietoa, mut sitten Israelissa ei niillä oo sitä." (3)
>
> "I guess even less in here [I'm seen as a Jew], because here everyone knows who converts and here it's common knowledge. But in Israel that's not the case." (3)

Others view that this knowledge of who has gone through the *giyur* process and who hasn't does indeed contribute to the acceptance of a person as a Jew. Some of the *gerim* view their acceptance in religious terms. If they are not accepted, it might be because their conversion is not accepted, and perhaps a stricter *giyur le<u>h</u>umra* in Israel or other European countries would solve this problem:

> "Joku voi olla että ei laske mua minyaniin. Suurin osa meidän seurakunnasta laskee. Mut siellä saattaa olla yks tai kaks jotka ei laske. Mikä on sit vähän surullista, mutta mä en voi sille asialle mitään. Ellen mä tee sitten giyur le<u>h</u>umraa jossain vaiheessa." (7)
>
> "It could be that someone doesn't count me into a minyan. Most of our congregants do. But there might be one or two who don't. Which is a bit sad, but I can't do anything about it. Unless I then do a giyur le<u>h</u>umra at some point." (7)

However most acknowledge that even then they might not be accepted.

> "Mutta toisaalta sitten, mikä on sitten tar - onko koskaan sellasta tilannetta että tällainen joka on kääntynyt, niin että se hyväksyttäis. Että kaikki hyväksyis. En tiedä onks se edes mahdollista. Vaikka ois minkälainen paperi." (7)
>
> "But then again, what's enough? Is there ever that kind of situation that a convert like me would be accepted? That everyone would accept. I don't know if that's even possible. Even with any kind of certificate." (7)

Judaims is an ethno-religion. The converts are aware of this and some see the question of acceptance tied to them not having 'Jewish blood'. One had become alienated from the congregation and Judaism due to perceived lack of acceptance:

> "Siinä on kun sä et oo kääntynyt tietyt barrierit olemassa. - - Mä olin jotenkin ajatellut, että siinä vaiheessa kun mä olen käynyt giyurin läpi, et yhtä äkkiä ne kaikki barrierit sulaa pois. Mut sit ku se ei tapahtunutkaan, vaan jatkuvasti huomas että joutuu ihmisille vastaamaan siihen kysymykseen, miks sä oot kääntynyt, miks sä oot kääntynyt. ja miks näin ja jos sä kerran oot kääntynyt niin miks sit tämä ja tämä. Se rupes jossain vaiheessa ottaa päähän. - - Mä petyin silleen kun se muuri siitä välistä ei koskaan sulanu pois." (4)

> "When you haven't yet converted there are certain barriers. - - I had somehow thought that when I had gone through the giyur, suddenly all those barriers would melt away. But then it didn't happen. All the time you needed to answer to the question why have you converted, and if you have converted then why this and that. At some point it started to get on my nerves. - - I was disappointed when the wall never melted away." (4)

3.5. Who are the Finnish *Gerim*? A Grounded Theory

In this chapter I will present my descriptive grounded theory on those who convert to (Orthodox) Judaism without prior Jewish family members. Who are they and how do they view themselves and Judaism?

Unlike for many other groups of converts (see f. ex Furseth & Repstad, 2006, p. 130), for gentile converts converting to Judaism, social networks are not important. Most often conversion to Judaism is not motivated by social networks, but by theological reasons or by identification with Jews. Interest in Judaism and conversion without Jewish networks is aided by the popularisation of internet use. Half of the *gerim* had no personal relationship with Jews before they decided to convert. Those who presented higher identification with Jews have stronger Israel connection than those who are mostly theologically minded. For most of those with religious backgrounds, the prior religiosity included Christian Zionism or Judaising habits. Ethics is seen as the most important part of Judaism.

Becoming a Jew is a process. The ger has had a feeling about being a Jew for some time already and a conversion is seen as a validation of that feeling. Yet a person truly becomes a Jews only after she has passed the standard conversions ritual, which combines both acceptance of rabbinic authority and *ger*'s active acceptance of Jewish law.
Yet even when people say they are *halakhically* Jews, they might have reservations about how truly Jewish they are. This is in connection with perceived acceptance by other Jews as Jews. All acknowledge that not everyone is going to ever see them as Jews.

Although with such a small sample correlations are difficult to make, I have some suggestions based on the data. Here the questions and answers of 'eating Jewish', 'dressing Jewish', attendance activity and family relations were important. The correlations that presented themselves in the data were: *Ger*'s religious background is quite likely non-normative. Those who have previous religious family background are more likely to be committed to Jewish observance, to the congregational and to other Jewish activities. Those with higher commitment to *halakha* and Jewish activities are also more likely to have

stronger Jewish networks either before or after they have converted, to tell openly about their Jewishness to outsiders, present Jewishness with their outward appearance and adopt of what they perceive as Jewish tradition.

4 Discussion

In this chapter I will analyse previous case studies and previous general conversion theories, and highlight where they match my results and where they diverge. It is scientifically important to point out where previous theory fails to meet the new data (Stiles, 2007, p. 123).

4.1 Motivation

Mokoko Gampiot's case study found three motivation categories for gentile converts. The first category was identification with Jews which they had acquired either by living among Jews or in Israel. The second ger category was those with existential reasons to do so. If they were intellectually oriented they have found catalyst for their interest from Maimonides, *kabbala* or even popular culture. The third category believed they belonged into some Jewish or Jewish-related group via ancestors. (Mokoko Gampiot, 2013, pp. 121–122.)

Steiner's study of German converts found two gentile convert categories. The first category is theologically motivated conversions. The second category was formed from existential seekers looking for new identity in Jewishness. After the Holocaust theological reasonings for conversion were that the survival from continuous persecution testified the truth of Judaism. More contemporary theological reasons underline critique of Christianity. Yet Germany is special case for conversions. Steiner writes that conversions are at least partly motivated by the guilt of the Holocaust and the desire to make amends or to identify with the victim. (Steiner, 2016, pp. 158–161.) Steiner even writes that: ”Becoming Jewish is considered hip in Germany” (Steiner, 2016, p. 162).

In my study I found gerim belonging into all of Mokoko Gampiot's and Steiner's overlapping categories. However, in my study, the motivation of identification with Jews for one reason or another was never the only reason, but religious reason were also cited. Also the spectre of Holocaust seems to be especially German phenomenon. Although Holocaust

did present itself in my sample, it was not considered widely important and did not affect the Finnish macro conditions.

In his article "Noachides and Converts to Judaism", Simon Schoon claims that contemporary converts to Judaism are people from mostly Christian backgrounds who are disappointed with the Church and their previous identities who look for meaningful content and spirituality for their lives and are charmed by Jewish customs (Schoon, 2006, p. 124). Although all the converts of this research come from Christian culture sphere, not all had been baptised; reasons varied from parents being leftist to belonging to a Christian sect. They were not disappointed with the Church as an institution, but with Christianity's truth claims. Although lived Judaism was deemed important, the customs were not significantly present in the narratives, but only how they are related to the *halakha* and the *Tora*.

4.2 Jewish Identification

Mokoko Gampiot found different aspects that were important for the black French *ger*. These were embracing *Tora*; Holocaust; Israel; and abiding religious rules and practices, particularly *kashrut* (or keeping dietary laws) and circumcision. (Mokoko Gampiot, 2013, pp. 123–124.) *Gerim* in my sample were *halakhically* minded and saw religious rules and practices and embracing the *Tora* important. However most of them did not deem the state of Israel or Holocaust important for their Jewish identity.

Religious motivations and identifications can also be found in Hadari's study. She writes: "It may be telling, then, that not one of my British participants made a single reference to am Israel or the concept of a Jewish people; such a concept arose neither as a motivating factor for conversion nor in response to the question: 'What is Jewishness to you?' Without exception, my interlocutors spoke of the 'Jewish community'." (Hadari, 2016, p. 143.) As with Hadari's research, also most of my informants priorised individual religious commitments over nationhood. When I asked 'What is most important in Judaism/Jewishness?', the common answer was ethics, not the Jewish nation or peoplehood. The "Jewish community" was mentioned secondarily. Those few who did mention the Jewish people as one of the most important things in Jewishness, were those who in general identified more the with the state of Israel and Jewish people. In their answers they spoke of becoming and being part of Jewish nation.

Hadari's main point is that the *gerim* can either be active agents of conversion, or they are passive converts who are converted by *bet din*. Hadari writes that in diaspora converts are active subjects in conversion, and in Israel under *Rabbanut* conversions they are passive objects of conversion. (Hadari, 2016, pp. 141–142.) Also in my sample the *gerim* saw themselves as active subjects. Yet Hadari's informants' experiences differ from those in my research: Hadari writes "Many of the converts whom I interviewed described a feeling of complete powerlessness in the hands of the bet din" (Hadari, 2016, p. 137). However, none of my informants presented any negative views of the *bet din* they had attended either in Finland, in Israel or in other countries. They did not view themselves to 'resign' or to 'relinquish control' over their Jewishness. They accepted that in the Jewish matrix *bet din* decides on conversions. This fact might also be due to different contexts. *London Beth Din*'s conversion standards are considered quite demanding ("Conversion", 2018).

The main claim of Hadari's paper is that in the modern era it "is possible to conceptualise Jewishness as either one or the other, either ethnicity or religion" (Hadari, 2016, p. 137). This reading has no basis in rabbinic texts, and Edrei writes that "the attempt to read the medieval halakhic discourse as distinguishing between religious conversion and nationalist conversion is a complete anachronism" (Edrei, 2015, p. 122). Although I do not think that Jewishness can be divided neatly into two halves, some aspects of this division can be seen in my sample. The informants often struggle with the issue that they are not viewed fully Jews because they do not have 'Jewish blood', but they acknowledge that Jewishness does have these two components; religion and ethnicity.

4.3 Differences Between *Gerim* Groups

Gerim groups present different motivations for conversion and how they view Judaism or Jewishness. Buckser writes about the bitterness of a patrilineal Jew when she is required to convert due to often practical reasons. Some of these converts view their own Jewish identity more important than *halakha*, and often do not see the reason to convert as they already view themselves as Jews. (Buckser, 2003, p. 78.) When I myself asked informally from peripheric Jews if they were interested in converting, the answer was no, they are Jews already, why convert. As can be seen from my data, for gentile converts religious conversion is the only way of becoming a Jew. Because for this group just feeling like a Jew is not enough, *halakha*

as a concept and as a practise is held in higher esteem than Jewish identity. Even the informant who had had an Israeli identity placed *halakha* as the most important thing in Judaism/Jewishness. Yet later she modified her answer to *lifestyle* being the most important thing. Perhaps here, what the informants think that I as a researcher want to hear, plays a big part on how they answer.

The difference between *gerim* and other Jews can be viewed also in what is seen as important in Judaism/Jewishness. In my sample the foremost answer was ethics. This in my opinion reflects the individualistic nature of conversion, where religion is viewed as a tool for individual betterment and relationship to God. Yet, when I informally asked the same question from Jews and peripheric Jews, the answers highlighted the long history of Jewish nation, or just feeling Jewish, answers that reflect sense of Jewish identity and peoplehood.

4.4 Religious Conversion in the Light of This Research

Below I will briefly cover why data based grounded theory was needed for this study, instead of theoretical conversion models. As already noted, the emic and etic viewpoint of Jewish conversion differ. As can be seen from the data, many claims that etic conversion theories have, do not fit the narratives of Finnish *gerim*. Starting with the idea and definition of the word conversion itself.

Rambo & Farhadian write how many scholars view that *authentic* conversion is based on the change of religious concerns (Rambo & Farhadian, 2014, pp. 7–8). Bockian & Glenwick & Bernstein write: ”*Conversion* has been defined as the process in which a person gives up one philosophical perspective or ordered view of the world for another ” (Bockian, Glenwick, Bernstein, 2005, p. 35). Jindra claims that this is not always the case in conversion: some people align themselves with new groups that represent what they already believed prior joining (Jindra, 2011, p. 276). A change happens on an institutional or communal level, but not in beliefs. The data from my sample is more in line with Jindra’s claim. *Gerim* see conversion or becoming a Jew as a process where the Jewish worldview often matches their already held beliefs. Mokoko Gampiot also finds this phenomenon from her data, where people often describe their pre-conversion selves as 'Jew at heart' (Mokoko Gampiot, 2013, p. 120).

Also in Gooren's model the term *conversion* is reserved only for radical personal change (Gooren, 2014, pp. 48—49). In his survey of past conversion theories Gooren decides to highlight the Jamesian Evangelical Christianity-influenced 'I saw the light' conversion narrative and writes: "A highly relevant finding is that Heirich (1977: 658) suggests that converts tend to exaggerate their preconversion sinfulness to increase the power and value of their current conversions" (Gooren, 2014, p. 28). None of my informants mentioned any sinfulness prior to conversion. Rambo himself in his conversion model requires a crisis of some sort (Rambo & Farhadian, 1999, p. 26). Although some of my informants started their conversion process by questioning their previous worldviews, not all did so. Those who did, did not describe this experience as a personal crisis.

The emic view on conversion is: "conversion is what a group or a person says it is" (Rambo & Farhadian, 2014, p. 10). In the context of this study, the emic point of view has been the transition point named by the converts themselves, which also coincides with the understanding of the rabbinic establishment, that is immersing in the *mikve* and accepting the *mitsvot*.

4.5 Evaluating Grounded Theory

Grounded theory was a good fit for this research. There seem to be only a few previous researches that are interested in any type of converts to Judaism, and this study seems to be the first one that does not include peripheric Jews, but the sample consists only of gentile converts. As I needed to gather my own data and analyse it myself, data based method was clearly the best option. Also, as conversion to Judaism is not widely studied, it has not had an impact on more general conversion studies and on theories that still seem to be much influenced by Christian evangelical notion of what conversion is. Other conversion studies also seek to psychologise or fit the data that was gathered into an already existing model. This was not the objective of this study, where the voice of the convert herself is heard. This research also benefits from the researcher's insider status and hermeneutic understanding.

5 Conclusion

Only a minority of converts identify as Orthodox. Only minority of converts convert without Jewish family backgrounds. The Orthodox gentile converts who have been the subject of this research are minority in every possible way. My study questions were, how do Finnish converts to Judaism without Jewish family members view Jewishness and their conversion.

I found out that *ger*'s identity as a Jew is often ambivalent: The *ger* has had a feeling about being a Jew for some time already and a conversion is seen as a validation of that feeling. They see that a person truly becomes a Jew only after she has passed the standard conversions ritual, which combines both acceptance of rabbinic authority and *ger*'s active acceptance of Jewish law. Yet even when *gerim* say they are *halakhically* Jews, they might have reservations about how truly Jewish they are.

This study did not set out to psychologisise why do people convert. I can only map out conversion paths and present suggestions for correlations: *Ger*'s religious background is quite likely non-normative. Those who have previous religious family background are more likely to be committed to Jewish observance, to the congregational and to other Jewish activities. For most of those with religious backgrounds, the religiosity included Christian Zionism or Judaising habits. Those with higher commitment to *halakha* and Jewish activities are also more likely to have stronger Jewish networks either before or after they have converted, to tell openly about their Jewishness to outsiders, present Jewishness with their outward appearance and adopt of what they perceive as Jewish tradition.

Those without previous Jewish backgrounds, or *gentile converts* as I have named them differ how they view themselves and Judaism from *peripheric Jews*. Almost all of my informants saw ethics as the most important part of Judaism and Jewish life. The main pull for *gentile converts* to convert to Judaism is not through social networks, but the reasons are theological or connected to identification with Jews. For more recent converts internet and social media is the most important source of information,which makes Jewish study possible, without knowing any Jews.

This study also found out that the conversion models found from general religious conversion literature are often influenced by Christian evangelical notion of what conversion is and do not match Jewish conversion paths.

As per requirements of outer validity, this research has theorised its data findings. This descriptive theory can be applied to other gentile converts and to test the found correlations. This study may be furthered with many types of research: It is possible to compare gentile converts with other convert groups within Judaism and to investigate how these groups differ. Also it is possible to compare gentile converts to converts of other religions and examine whether target religion makes difference in convert profiles and conversion experiences.

My research may prove to be useful to those interested in religious conversions and the questions of evolving nature of Jewishness. For the people outside the academia, this research may help rabbis and born Jews to understand the interests and experiences of converts.

The Jewish and congregational activities of *gerim* often end with the *bet din* and *mikve* and *gerim* “drop out”. It would also be interesting to do a longitudinal study, reinterview the same people in five or ten years' time and see how the self perception and commitment to Judaism and the Jewish people has changed.

I want to thank my informants who were not only brave but kind to participate in this study.

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